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A Quick Q & A with Tom Scocca—Author of *Beijing Welcomes You*

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by Jeffrey Wasserstrom



Tom Scocca's engaging new book, [*Beijing Welcomes You: Unveiling the Capital City of the Future*](#), which explores his experiences in China during its pre-Olympic and Olympic moments, has been getting enthusiastic reviews, including [one by Jonathan Yardley](#) of the Washington Post and [one](#) that yours truly did for Time. Seeing references online to the author giving talks about his book at various East Coast venues, I decided to send a few questions his way on topics ranging from the reaction he's getting from audiences to how he keeps up with Chinese events now that he's based back in the US. He readily obliged, with answers that often reminded me of why I'd liked the book so much (and in one case confirmed that I was on the right track to bring up parallels to Twain's approach to memoir and travel writing in my Time essay). Here is what I asked and what he wrote in response:

JW: I know you've been touring to promote the book. Any questions you've gotten after book talks that have struck you as particularly interesting or unexpected?

TS: I hadn't counted on the book coming out in the middle of quite this much economic and social turmoil in the West, so questions about America being surpassed by China are coming more frequently than I would have guessed. The bottom line remains that neither country is going to make the other go away. Any Chinese *schadenfreude* over the debt-ceiling crisis is tempered by China's desire not to see its American investments crater.

JW: Any questions you wish you'd get asked—but don't?

TS: The audiences have been pretty thorough. I've been carrying around a copy of the official Chinese party-line answers to difficult questions, in case I get stuck on a sensitive subject, but I keep forgetting to consult it.

JW: I'm always interested in influences, so were there any books—need not have anything to do with China—that you had in mind as literary models of a sort for what you were trying to do with *Beijing Welcomes You*?

TS: As soon as I signed the book contract, I read Mark Twain's *Roughing It* and I reread my copy of Marco Polo, and I tried to keep it at that. Back when I reviewed movies, I used to avoid reading other reviews before seeing and writing about one, to stay as ignorant (or "open-minded") as I could. I read a chapter or two of *Maximum City*, and I thought, this is a strong way to write about a foreign city, and I'll be in trouble if I don't put this away right now. So I did.

JW: Was there any book you read in prepping for or during your time in China that you found particularly helpful for orienting yourself to the country—or to Beijing as a city?

TS: The magazine *That's Beijing* — there was a struggle over control of the title in 2008, and it now publishes as *The Beijinger* — was indispensable, especially its annual Insider's Guides to the city. Eric Abrahamsen's [Beijing by Foot](#) was immeasurably helpful. For serious political and historical context, there was [Out of Mao's Shadow](#), by my old friend (and accidental author-portrait photographer) Phil Pan.

JW: Will you be in London for the 2012 Games? And whether or not you are heading there, any thoughts on the impact Beijing's handling of the Olympics is likely to have on this next Summer Games?

TS: I have no idea what I'll be doing about London 2012. It might be nice just to sit down in front of the TV at home and watch some events. It will be interesting to see how London's handling of the event compares to Beijing's—especially now that London has gone up in flames, which China attributes to Great Britain's careless attitude toward social control.

Of course you're going to have mobs, China figures, if you just keep letting the citizens communicate with each other on Facebook and Twitter. So now you have Britain discussing—and last week, San Francisco actually deploying—a Chinese-style communication shutdown to keep unrest under control. That's one of the scarier legacies of the 2008 Games: the West's tacit endorsement of China's security strategies.

JW: I assume you like to keep up on China from afar now. If so, how do you do this?

TS: Evan Osnos at the *New Yorker* and Gady Epstein at the *Economist* keep me supplied with excellent reporting and active Twitter accounts. Phil Pan's Twitter account is also a good survey of what's breaking in China. *The New York Times*, especially the business section. And I keep an eye on *China Daily* for the government-approved news.